

Sermon on John 1:35-42 and Isaiah 49:1-7
Susan Verbrugge
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church
January 20, 2008

I have always loved the gospel of John. Even before I went to seminary and received all the high falutin' knowledge that I have now about theology and the Bible, I loved the way John describes things. I love the different images he gives for Jesus, like Word, Living Water, Light, Bread of Life, Vine, and many, many others. This gospel is rich with imagery that helps us try to understand in our very limited, human way just who this Jesus is. And, I love it because it is so different than the other gospels. Even though it is set in this world, it seems otherworldly.

The first chapter of John is one of my very favorite passages in all of scripture. And, this part of the chapter that we read really tries to help us hear just who this Jesus might be. John gives us lots of descriptions of Jesus to chew on. Just in these verses alone, Jesus is Lamb of God, Rabbi/Teacher, Messiah/Anointed. And, on either side of this passage, Jesus is also called He on whom the Spirit descended, Son of God, King of Israel, and Son of Man.

John is not waiting around until later to let us deduce for ourselves who this Jesus might be. He pushes us in the very beginning of his gospel to understand that this is no prophet, no ordinary teacher, or no all around good guy. This man is God. People have argued through the ages about what it might mean that Jesus was both human and God, but John seems to have no problem with it. This man is the one they had been waiting for, God with us, the Messiah.

But, there is something else here as well. In this passage, it seems that these men that John introduces Jesus to have been waiting for him. Maybe they've been talking about the coming of a Messiah over the last days and weeks. Maybe they have been wondering together what he will be like. Whatever the situation, they are not at all surprised or dumbfounded by what John says to them. "Look, here is the Lamb of God." Sounds like a pretty bold statement to me, but these men seem to just take it as exactly what they had been waiting for. They don't ask questions; they follow.

Then, Jesus turns to them with what seems to me an odd question. He says, "What are you looking for?" Now, depending on the tone used, we could come up with different interpretations of just what Jesus was asking. For instance, what if he said: "What are *you* looking for?" (Negative emphasis on the you) Or "What are you looking for?" (Worn out, exhausted tone) It could definitely change the meaning.

But for argument's sake today, let's say that he said it in a rather straight forward manner. "What are you looking for?" Just what is he asking of these men? Has he sensed that they have been talking and wondering about the coming of the One greater than John? He seems to know that they aren't just following along because they have nothing better to do that day. They are hoping for something, expecting something, wanting something.

The men answer, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" This too seems an odd choice of words. It certainly doesn't answer the question Jesus asked. Maybe they are just stalling for time because they aren't sure how to answer the

question or maybe they are saying that their answer is not a short one. They will need some time to sit down with him and tell him what they are looking for, what they are wanting, what they are yearning for. And mostly, they just want to be with him.

So Jesus then issues an invitation. “Come and see.” What a beautiful invitation. “Come and see.” I wonder if these men knew what in the world they were in for.

How would you answer that question if Jesus posed it to you? We are doing our best to follow Jesus. What if he turned to us and said, “What are you looking for?” If we all dug deep inside ourselves, I bet there would be as many different answers to that question as there are people in this room. Some of them may be for healing of bodies and souls; some of them may be that mom and dad would quit arguing; some may be that a soldier would come back home in one piece; some may be that the miracle of peace would become reality; some may be that the emptiness inside would be filled; some may be that we wouldn’t pick up that next drink; some may be that hungry bellies might be filled. And my guess is that Jesus would be interested in all of these.

But notice that Jesus doesn’t just wave a magic wand and say that what we want will come to pass. Instead, he says, “Come and see.” He invites us into discipleship. He invites us to be in ministry with him. There is nothing passive in this man. In the New Interpreter’s Bible, Gail O’Day says, “John does not report stories about discipleship, but invites the reader to share in the call to discipleship” (534, 1996). “Come and see.”

Also notice that Jesus makes no promises that what we are looking for is necessarily what will come to pass. Barbara Brown Taylor says, “Jesus is terrible at meeting people’s expectations of him” (*Christian Century*, April 3, 2007). If we are brave enough to come with Jesus and see what comes to pass, participating in this call to be with this God among us, we may get something that we never asked for, never dreamed of, never even conceived. We may see ways that we need to change our lives that scare us to the very core of our beings. We may be called to open ourselves in ways that we never thought possible. Following Jesus may be the hardest thing we have ever done.

In the passage from Isaiah, the prophet is reassured that before he was born, God knew him. God protects him in the palm of God’s hand. He knows that God is with him. And, he knows his calling, to speak the words that will bring Israel home in Yahweh. He is honored in God, and God is his strength. He knows what he is to do. He knows what the expectations are.

But then, he hears a new word. Not only is he to bring Israel home, he is to also preach the salvation and love of Yahweh to all peoples. He is to reach out to them in light and hope. He has a new calling, an unexpected calling.

Watch out what you may be sure of as you follow, for newer, bigger, stranger callings may be coming. What are you looking for?

In the verses immediately following those we read in John, Jesus encounters Nathaniel. After a rather strange exchange, Jesus says, “Do you believe just because I said I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these. Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the

angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man” (John 1:49b-51). Will we believe and follow only for the things we think Jesus is about or will we follow Jesus knowing that what we are hoping for, what we are asking for, what we think Jesus is doing is only the tip of the iceberg?

There’s a song, rather dated now, that Diana Ross sings. Some of the lyrics say: “Do you know where you’re goin’ to? Do you like the things that life is showin’ you? Where are you goin’ to? Do you know?” (words written by Gerry Goffin and Michael Messer from the theme song to the movie Mahogany).

Do we know where we are going? Do we like the things life is showing us? Let us see. Let us “come and see”. It might mean some really hard things, some really beautiful things, some really terrifying things, some really lovely things. It might mess our lives up, at least the way we have them planned. But one thing is for sure. We will be with Jesus. And what could be better than that?